

# WOMEN IN THE BIBLE 9 - RACHEL



## GENESIS 29

[Jacob Arrives in Paddan Aram] Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples. There he saw a well in the open country, with three flocks of sheep lying near it because the flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well's mouth and water the sheep. Then they would return the stone to its place over the mouth of the well. ...

GENESIS 29:6 Then Jacob asked them, "Is he well?" "Yes, he is," they said, "and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep."

GENESIS 29:9 While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherd.

**GENESIS 29:10** When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of his uncle Laban, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep.

**GENESIS 29:11** Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud.

**GENESIS 29:12** He had told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and a son of Rebekah. So she ran and told her father.

**GENESIS 29:14** Then Laban said to him, "You are my own flesh and blood." **[JACOB MARRIES LEAH AND RACHEL]** After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month,

**GENESIS 29:16** Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel.

**GENESIS 29:17** Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful.

**GENESIS 29:18** Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."

**GENESIS 29:20** So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

**GENESIS 29:25** When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?"

**GENESIS 29:28** And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife.

**GENESIS 29:29** Laban gave his servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her attendant.

**GENESIS 29:30** Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.

**GENESIS 29:31 [JACOB'S CHILDREN]** When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless.

**GENESIS 30:1** When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!"

**GENESIS 30:6** Then Rachel said, "God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son." Because of this she named him Dan.

**GENESIS 30:7** Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son.

**GENESIS 30:8** Then Rachel said, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won." So she named him Naphtali.

**GENESIS 30:14** During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes."

**GENESIS 30:15** But she said to her, "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" "Very well," Rachel said, "he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes."

**GENESIS 30:22** Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive.

**GENESIS 30:25** [**JACOB'S FLOCKS INCREASE**] After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland."

**GENESIS 31:4** So Jacob sent word to Rachel and Leah to come out to the fields where his flocks were.

**GENESIS 31:14** Then Rachel and Leah replied, "Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate?"



Rachel

Her Story

LOVE CONQUERS ALL

**Rachel** means 'ewe', a female sheep, a symbol of prosperity and security for nomadic people.

## **Rachel's Anguish**

No matter how she prayed to God, no matter how much she was loved by Jacob, Rachel did not conceive. In desperation she gave her maid Bilhah to Jacob, so that

he could conceive a child with Bilhah as a surrogate mother for Rachel. This practice was common in the ancient world; the woman became a concubine instead of a servant, and it was a step up the social ladder for her. She might become the mother of the future tribal leader.

Bilhah had a son, whom Rachel named Dan. Then she had a second son, and Rachel called him Naphtali. In response, Leah gave her own maid Zilpah to Jacob, and this resulted in yet more sons: Gad and Asher. A bitter rivalry grew up between the two women.

We should start with **ONCE UPON A TIME** a young traveler called Jacob was on a journey, and came to a well in the land of the son of the east. He chatted with the shepherds there, telling them that his family had originally come from this same area. They pointed towards a woman in the distance, saying she was the daughter of his mother's brother.

While they waited for her to arrive, Jacob observed that it is too early in the day to fold the sheep, a not-very-subtle way of saying they were slacking at their job, but a signal to the reader that Jacob had already developed work ethic. He did not need a master to tell him what should be done, and would thus be a good provider for the woman who chose him.

✚ The writing proposes that Rachel may have heard this exchange between Jacob and the shepherds, and been favorably impressed.

When Jacob saw Rachel at close quarters, he was infatuated. In an act of bravado, he removed the great stone single-handed, hoping to impress the young woman. He went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud.

Jacob introduced himself, becoming quite emotional in the process. He had made a long and grueling journey of about five hundred miles, and now found himself at journey's end, with the woman of his dreams. He was in the right place, with the right person, and his emotions spilled over.



Rachel ran to her father's house and told him about the young man. Her father, Laban, ran out to meet Jacob, welcoming him warmly.

- ✚ The writing keeps reiterating that Jacob is the son of Laban's sister: in many ancient societies, the relationship between a child and its mother's brother, the maternal uncle, was considered even more important than that between a child and its father. This makes Laban's later betrayal of Jacob even more offensive.

**Rachel and Jacob were in love**, so Jacob approached Laban for permission to marry her. But Jacob had come empty-handed, and could not produce the normal bride-price for Rachel.

- ✚ Laban agreed that his daughter might marry Jacob but stipulated that, as a bride price, Jacob must contract to work for him for seven years (*the seven year cycle was a sacred one in the ancient world*).

Jacob agreed, and he and Rachel settled down to work out the bride price. He loved her so much, the writing tells us, that the seven years seemed only like a few days.

- ✚ What neither realized that Laban had agreed to let 'his daughter' marry Jacob, but **had not specified which daughter** it would be. Rachel had an older sister Leah, not so beautiful, and Laban had quietly pointed out that the older sister in a family was usually married before her younger sister.

Neither understood the implications of this statement.

When the seven years were over Jacob demanded his bride, and Laban prepared a wedding feast. The bride was dressed in the finest clothes, including a rich head-dress and veil that covered her face.

When the feasting was over her father led her, still veiled, into the room of her bridegroom, and the bride and Jacob made love.



By this time, Jacob may have had a considerable amount to drink, and didn't realize until morning that he had been tricked into marrying the wrong sister.

The furious Jacob confronted Laban. 'What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?'

So after the ceremonial week of the wedding to Leah was over, Rachel married Jacob, becoming his second but most-loved wife.

## **Believe and Rejoice**

Rachel may have been the more loved of the two women, but she was not the most fertile. Though she and Jacob were deeply in love, she did not conceive for many years.

Leah on the other hand had no problem in bearing children. Almost immediately after marrying Jacob and despite the fact she was '**unloved**', she became pregnant and gave birth to a series of male babies.

Finally, after a very long time, Rachel finally conceived and bore a son and said, '*God has taken away my reproach*'; and she named him Joseph, saying '*May the Lord add to me another son!*'

Rachel has a son, Benjamin, and dies.

## **Laban Unknowing Cursed Rachel**

**Prize and retribution** are complex perceptions. Suffice it to say that Divine intervention in the world is frequently through seemingly mundane acts. For instance, the Bible defines the death of Rachel instantly following the problematic delivery of her second son, Benjamin, but her death cannot be discussed without bringing up "*the curse*."

After Jacob and his family began their journey back to Canaan, Laban and his sons followed in hot pursuit. At first he accused Jacob of carrying away his daughters as if they were captives: "*Why did you flee secretly...and did not allow me to kiss my*

*[grand]sons and my daughters?" (31:26-28). At the end of his great speech informing Jacob that God had warned him in a dream not to hurt Jacob, Laban suddenly asks, "Why have you stolen **my gods**?" (31:30).*

Before leaving Aram Naharayim, Rachel had taken her father's **idols**. While her motive is not recorded in the Bible, the Torah /Midrash explains that Rachel did not want her father to continue his idolatrous ways. When Laban demanded that his idols be returned to him, Jacob, not knowing of Rachel's part in this matter, announced that "*whoever you find has your idols, that person shall not live. In front of our kinsmen, identify for yourself what I have [that is yours] and take it.*" (31:32), when Laban came to search Rachel's tent, she sat on the idols and told her father that she could not rise, "*for the way of women was upon her.*" Laban left without his idols.

**Words have power.** And while Rachel did not succumb to the curse immediately, several years later her life was, indeed, cut short. Earlier in the story, Rachel said she would die if she had no sons (30:1). In the end it was having sons that killed her.



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